

[Side remarks]

Q: Good afternoon. Today is June 2nd, 2016. My name is Estelle Cadrain and I'm here at the Newton Free Library with Kevin McElaney. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. Thank you for-- Did I say that part? No? Okay. What is your connection to Newton? If you have lived in Newton before or after your service what did you miss most about home, aside from your family and friends?

A: When I was away?

Q: Yes.

A: My connection with Newton goes back a long time. In fact the house I'm living in now is my grandmother's and grandfather's, and they bought it in 1916, so a hundred years. And it's on Emerald Street. My grandfather's name was Luciano and I had an uncle Fiducio, and the Fiducios were connected to the Lucianos. And where I live in Nonantum it used to be a big Italian neighborhood, and so that's a hundred years on my mother's side. On my father's side, they come from Woburn Court. They were there after World War Two. They bought a house there on, I guess it's Woburn Court or Woburn Lane or Woburn something, Woburn Park. That was it, Woburn Park. And so that's on my father's side. My mother graduated from Our Lady's here in Newton. All the brothers and sisters went there. And that's my connection to Newton.

In fact, the house I live in and the room that I sleep in was the room that my mother was born in and the room that she died in. And that's something I don't think you'll see too often nowadays. So, she passed in 1999. What was the other question? What did I miss most?

Q: Yes.

A: Just being here, because when we were in Vietnam we used to say, all the guys over there used to say, “When we go back we go back to the world,” because it was like another planet in Vietnam. Here I was a kid from Boston that just knew cement and all of a sudden I’m in this forest. It’s a beautiful country, beautiful people, but the war was going on at the same time, so they were unable to enjoy it.

Q: Okay.

A: You used to miss home. You used to miss people. Everything was so new and so quick. That’s what I missed.

Q: What were you doing before you entered the service or what was your life like before?

A: Trying not to go into the service. At that time they had the draft, and I had, I graduated from high school in 1964 and I went to the service, I was drafted in 1968, so those four years I was just kicking around, trying to-- I did some parts in college, because if you were in college at the time you didn’t have to go into the draft, if you were married you didn’t have to go into the draft, if you were rich you didn’t have to go into the draft. There were many ways to get out of it that a lot of people took advantage of. And what we ended up with in Vietnam were mostly poor, Black, inner city kids, and a lot of kids from the south. They like to go to war. They were the best soldiers, because they were used to guns. The southern boys were-- You wanted to be around them when the action started, because they actually knew what they were doing. And the rest of us were just avoiding...trying to avoid.

Q: Okay.

A: This is so far away now. I can’t believe it was 50 years.

Q: That's a long time.

A: I was there 1968/1969, of course those were years of turmoil here in the States. Compared to what we were doing, they called it advanced infantry training down in Fort Polk, Louisiana. But during that summer was the summer that Martin Luther King was killed, Bobby Kennedy was killed, and we were actually on alert before going to Vietnam, because they were burning cities down after Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, and so we were actually on alert that if things got really, really bad and the National Guard couldn't take care of it they were actually going to send in troops from Louisiana where I was, Fort Polk. And one place you don't-- That's where they made the movie *Tiger Land*. I can't think of the guy's name that was in it, but it was an excellent movie and very close to the truth. You got to Tiger Land, as soon as you got off the track you didn't walk again for eight weeks. You had to run everywhere. You had to run to get something to eat, run to the bathroom, for training, training purposes.

There were a lot of swamps [00:07:21] My first week in bivouac I saw an armadillo, which I never knew existed, of course, scared the hell out of him. Came right to the tent.

Q: Okay. So I guess we kind of answered the next question. So how did you adapt to military life, including the physical aspects, barracks, food, and social life?

A: There wasn't much social life and the food was Army food, which was-- And it was harder to-- In Vietnam we didn't get too many hot meals, so when we did get them they were welcome. You don't really adapt. You just follow orders. You just do what you're told to do and try to get it done as quick as possible. A lot of redundancy in the Army, dig a hole and fill it up, just something to do. What they're trying to do is train you to react quickly to what you're told to do and take care of the guy beside you and he'll take care of you, and that's how you get through it.

You don't fight wars for political reasons. You fight them for the guy next to you. So, as long as he is safe you're going to be safe. You just adapt.

It's amazing what a person can do. We did things that never crossed your mind. You just had to do it. Everything always got done. That's it in the Army, you just listen to the people that you think they know what they're doing. Whether they do or not you listen to them. Only if you didn't know what they were doing, you straightened them out.

Q: Okay. How did you stay in touch with your friends and family back at home?

A: Wrote a lot of letters, a lot of letters. And in fact I was going over them for this interview. My mother, of course, saved every letter that I sent home. Basically there was no-- The technology was not as advanced as it is now. We didn't have telephones and the computers and all that. This is 1968. Some of the greatest years, the most outstanding years in this country, if you go back and look at '68 it doesn't seem that far away to me, but to you guys it must seem like a long time ago.

Q: Where exactly did you serve and do you remember arriving and what it was like there?

A: Oh yeah. I remember arriving. We went to Alaska, went to Japan, and then to Vietnam. I spent one day in Japan. It was scary as hell, basically. It was just everything was new, everything was long and hot, everything was full of bugs, even the food, and the people, and we were just doing a tour. In those days you just did one tour, one year, and that was it. Kids nowadays, it's amazing, they keep sending them back. They do one, two, three, some of them five tours in Iraq, Afghanistan. It's going to be a heavy cost that this country hopefully will be able to repay, because a lot of those kids are going to be damaged, because there is a lot that you carry throughout your life after you've been to war and some stuff never comes out. It just stays inside.

But these kids now, when somebody actually wants to kill you it's a feeling that stays with you. Why would someone want to kill me? Why? I'm just a kid. And they were just kids too, I imagine. I really feel that these kids that are in there now, nobody knows, it seems, except their own families, that we're still at war, really, that kids out there, every day they have to go out with the idea and fear that it might be their last day. Many times, too many times that we thought it was going to be our last day, and it's something that stays with you.

Q: What were some of your most memorable experiences while serving?

A: I remember when we were getting out, going from a bad place to a good place. Sometimes it's a small thing. But as I was saying earlier, just getting a hot meal every once in a while, because everything had to be helicoptered in. I mean they would put us at the top of a hill or the bottom of a hill and have to get to the top of the hill, and then we would stay there a few days. Everything would be brought in by chopper. And then we would leave, and we'd--can't say that, we would leave, and then the other participants in the war would come back and take the hill back. And we would just leave the dead, the kids that didn't get off the hill.

It wasn't a war that-- People think of wars, generally if you're in a war you want to get the enemy and you go to where he is, but we never went to where, we never went to Hanoi. I mean we were limited even when we bombed it. You couldn't bomb here. You could bomb there. It was a stupid war. And I always joke with friends of mine that Robert McNamara, one of the wiz kids in the Kennedy administration, that he was afraid to die, because he knew, he knew what Hell was going to be like, because those people at the time were sending us into a war that they knew they weren't going to win. But they were going to try to win. So, he has got a lot to, he's passed on, but he has a lot to answer for. That's why he hung on so long. And there were a few of them, McNamara, Rusk, John F. Kennedy, he was, those great words that he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country." It caused a lot of problems.

But that whole history at that time, we were fighting the Red Menace, which proved eventually, that was the dominant theory, that was what was going on at the time, that if Vietnam falls then Cambodia then Mao, but it didn't quite happen that way. But that was their theory, because they're all from Harvard and they're all liberal. Liberals are different [00:16:33] to war, but they sent other kids to war. You're doing a great job.

Q: Oh thank you. Did you have any humorous or exciting memories?

A: A lot of, there was a lot of laughter, because you had to laugh. But the memories, you don't want to remember something about a lot of stuff, so it's very pick and choose, and you always choose the-- Because when kids are in there is always somebody leaving and always somebody coming, and the poor kids that are coming, those are the new ones, and we would do to them what was done to us when we were new. But when you got after so many months then you become what they call the short timer, so your time is short, you're more careful on which patrols you want to go on, and other people cover your back, because they know you're short, and you want to get out. You want that day to come more than anything. You count each day. But you lose a lot of friends. I mean you lose them in war, but you also lose them if they get out and they get out safely.

Flying back was better than flying in. I can remember that ride. That was joyous and alcohol-laden. [Laughter] But I made it, I made it through, and these days, these weekends, like Memorial Day and stuff, it's hard, because you remember guys that didn't make it. And you're wondering, now that you know the whole supposedly history of what actually went on, you pity them, you feel bad for them, because it seems like a waste. But it's every generation gets it. We don't, we can't avoid it, I guess. But we were all young once, and I won't say...

When you look at these pictures you'll see how actually young I was, even thin. It's amazing what the body can do when you have to do it.

Q: Do you remember what your return to civilian life was like?

A: It was difficult because of the time. It wasn't like the-- People say to me now if I'm wearing a hat or something that shows that I was in the service, they'll say, "Thank you for your service." And it's startling. There is no answer to that. I don't know what to say. It's like people say, "Happy Memorial Day." Well, that's crazy. It's an oxymoron, happy Memorial Day. You don't have happy memories about war generally.

But coming back and being on, I tried to get back into the routine, I guess you would call it, that we had before, but it wasn't possible on my side and it was also kind of tough on other people's side to deal with it, because of a lot of guilt, they didn't know. Nobody knew how things went. And it took a long time before you get to "Thank you for your service." You didn't get it then. People like John Kerry, I don't want to get political, but he marries well.

Q: How did your service and experiences affect your life and your outlook on war and the military in general?

A: It had amazing effects on me. Of course you don't know, because you don't know what it would have been, how my life would have been without it. So, it's--But it had a big effect on my life. It changes everything. It changes relationships, changes families, changes your political outlook, your moral outlook, how you deal with...it's hard, you know. I didn't know, I was a kid from Brighton, Boston, and I'm meeting people from all over the world, and it changes you. People that just, especially the kids over there, they were great--your heart went out to them, because we have a lot. We've always had more than anybody else. We've always thought we're

better than anybody else. Even if we didn't say it, that's what the country wants us to think, we're the City on the Hill, the Shining City, as Reagan used to say. But are we really? It's tough.

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make this so maudlin. I didn't know what to expect on this. But we had a lot of good memories. You meet so many great people. In fact we've had, we started having reunions, and [00:23:34] they had one in Illinois for families or birthdays or whatever, death days, where they're buried. But I didn't go, but friends of mine sent me tapes and pictures of people who did go, and when I looked I said, "I don't want to go to the next one. There are only old people there." And these were the guys, these guys.

That's Doc Lemon. He is from Detroit, Michigan. We've been looking for him and hadn't been able to make contact. He was funny, always had a grin and always had a beard. [00:24:23] beard, used to take them to the choppers and you see them coming now, I mean a lot of beards hanging from the bottom of the chopper. And they'd be cheering [00:24:35] guiding it in safely, don't care about anything else [00:24:43] long beards. It worked.

The Vietnamese people are good [00:24:56] Farmers. They were farmers. We used to go walking around their country and the looks that you would get from people. To them it must have been like people from another planet visiting their planet. What are they doing here? With all this gear and all these weapons and all this noise and all this constant noise, noise. When it wasn't raining-- it rained a lot, the monsoons, and once it started it just didn't stop. How about you, Chase, any questions?

__: I'm all set.

A: I love the name Chase.

__: Thank you.

A: I can see the guys saying, “I’m going to chase Chase.” [Laughter]

Q: I actually have one more question.

A: Go ahead.

Q: Okay. What would you like people to know a hundred years from now?

A: That war never changes. Kids are dying. And hopefully there is a reason for it sometimes. They’re just dying. War hurts. It kills. It shouldn’t be part of our existence. How naive is that? It’s been going on forever and forever and will go on forever.

Q: Okay. Well, thank you so much.

A: Thank you. Thank you for your interest.

[Side remarks]

END OF INTERVIEW